No. 21

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

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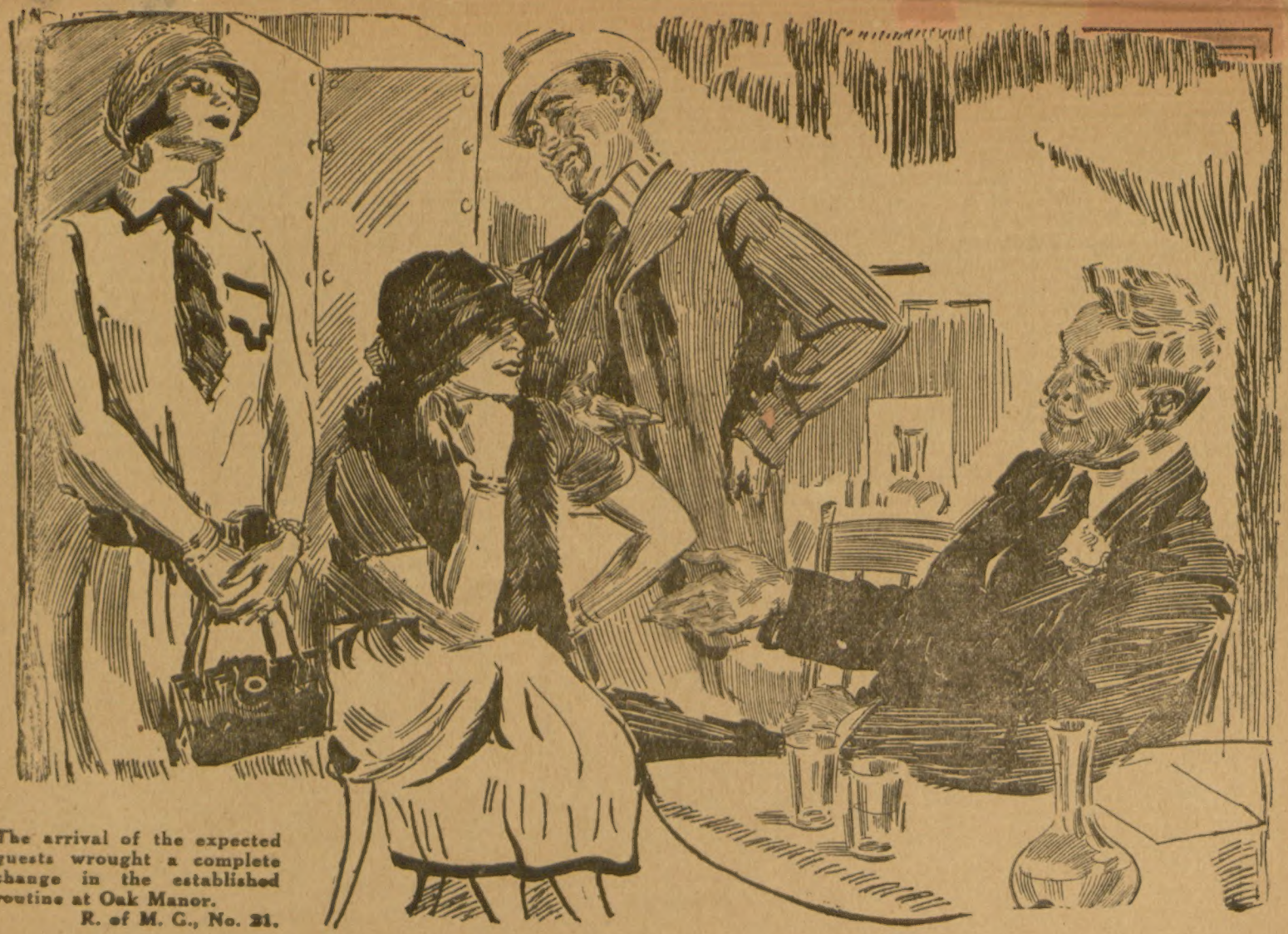

The arrival of the expected guests wrought a complete change in the established routine at Oak Manor.
R. of M. C., No. 31.

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ALICE was not the type of a woman to grant favors without a good reason. Parker had learned this by experience. He knew also that the woman had never done an unselfish, generous thing. He could not quite understand why she should want to entertain him at her home for a couple of weeks.

"I want to discharge a debt of gratitude," Alice went on a little hurriedly. "For I helped you get rid of some of your money upon several occasions. When you go west, I want you to go with the knowledge that at least I am not a fair-weather friend."

Again he fell to studying her, wondering silently what was behind all this.

Why should she, the wife of Philip Gordon take it upon herself to give him a few weeks of delicious idleness at Oak Manor when scores of others vainly angled for such an invitation?

Alice, he knew, was not the kind of a woman to waste her efforts on anyone without some difinite purpose in view.

"Will you answer one question truthfully?" he said, looking her squarely in the eyes.

"I—I will if I can," Alice wavered.

"What is your little game?" Parker wanted to know.

"Why—why—" she stammered. "I told you that I wanted to discharge a debt of gratitude and ——"

"Yes, so you did," he laughed. "But I don't believe it, my dear girl. There is something else behind all this, and before I accept your invitation you'll have to come clean."

Alice Gordon blushed violently.

For a long moment she seemed at a loss what to say. Finally she burst into a laugh.

"I'll tell you, Willard." She lowered her voice and reached across the table for his hand. "I told you in my letter that I was unhappily married. Well, that is true. I am losing my husband's love slowly, but surely. I—I am——"

"But what can I do?" Parker interrupted, as he reached for her hand and kissed it fervently.

"You can do this." Alice paused as if reluctant to go on. "You can make love to me. I am sick and tired of being shoved aside," she went on bitterly. "I want to make my husband jealous. You must help me, Willard, and I'll make it well worth your while."

He debated with himself for some time.

Then suddenly he jumped to his feet. With both of his hands pressed to his temples he measured the floor in big strides.

This thing was incredible. This beautiful woman was asking him to make love to her and she offered to pay him in the bargain. The thing appealed strongly to his already corroded moral fibre.

Why not? Why not enjoy a real vacation at Oak Manor without worrying about the board bill?

"Don't you — don't you think you are taking chances?" he inquired as he came to a stop in front of her.

"I know," she retorted recklessly. "But I don't care."

"What if I were to fall helplessly in love with you, Alice?" His voice was low and vibrant. "Do you realize that such a thing might easily happen? What then?"

She shrugged her shoulders and gave him a daring look. Her smile held an invitation.

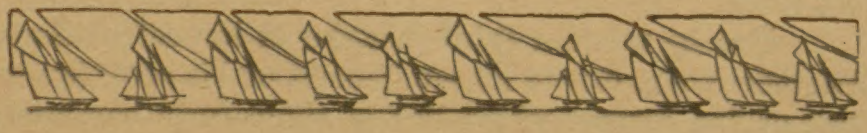
"Alice—Alice!"

With an entirely unexpected motion he swept her into his strong arms and before she knew it he had

kissed her full upon the mouth. She was still struggling to free herself when a sharp rap came on the door. It was pushed open before either of them became aware of it.

Both of them looked guilty and both felt angry at the unexpected and uncalled for interruption.

It could not be the waiter, for he had not been summoned. And if the person about to enter was not the waiter, who could it be?



Chapter 66

THE FLIGHT

WHEN A MAN sets out deliberately to commit a crime he rarely stops to think of the consequences. Carlton McLain's case was no exception to the generally accepted rule. His main motive for entering Vera Browning's house was the burning desire for revenge. This was backed up by greed and the fact that his financial resources had collapsed.

With the costly jewels of the actress in his possession he could snap his fingers at the world and enjoy a laugh at her expense.

His plans had been laid with the cunning of a professional. He made lovely young Ruth Gordon his confederate so he might hide behind her skirts in case something went amiss.

McLain figured shrewdly that, even if the worst was to happen, Olive Bentley's great wealth would protect Ruth.

But he made a fatal mistake in his calculations. Whether it was due to his excitement or his utter ignorance of the danger which lies in chloroform carelessly used, he took a human life.

The discovery of what he had done sent him into a frenzy of horror and fear.

He uttered a low cry, but he was not conscious of it. He knew, however, that he must have spoken, for at once, as though in answer, he heard a rustling movement in the adjoining room where Vera Browning's maid slept.

"Did you call, madam?" came the question clear

and distinct.

Carlton McLain, crouched over the dead woman's form, trembled. His eyes swung sidewise without a movement of the head until they rested on the door which led to the maid's room.

Those eyes of his—they were not under his control; were merely an outward indication of the frenzy which possessed him—flicked back to the bed again, and away to the door, and back once more.

Behind that door someone stirred. He heard the faint thudding of footsteps.

He recoiled from the bed, not swiftly, but with a slow and reluctant movement, as though he were loath to go. He backed from the shadow into the moonlight by the window. Then panic drove him into desperate flight.

Ahead of him, somewhere, a light flashed on and he heard the maid's voice again very clearly. This acted as a spur.

Before him the way lay open. But as he approached the head of the stairs he suddenly became conscious that his escape was cut off. And then he was halted by a low-voiced command which said low and yet horribly distinct:

"Stand where you are!"

McLain had time to realize that the voice was that of Guy Fillmore, the murdered woman's press agent. The hall was dark. He obeyed the command and stood motionless with a sudden desire to lift his hands into the air.

But this inaction on his part did not last more than a few seconds. He must get away no matter what the cost. If he was caught thus almost red-handed, nothing could save him from the electric chair. With frantic haste the murderer ran through the dark hall.

"Stop! — Stop!" Guy Fillmore's command came

twice more in rapid succession.

Sounds of running feet followed this. McLain slid forward cautiously.

So long as no one switched on the light he was safe from immediate detection.

He guessed what had happened. Ruth Gordon, impatient at his long delay, must have acted on her own initiative since he left her in the library.

No doubt she had attempted to take the oil painting from the wall, made too much noise which awakened Guy Fillmore, a guest in the house.

McLain's mind was working swiftly. The Gordon girl was in danger below. If she was caught she would blurt out the truth involving him inextricably.

So he plunged down the stairs, reckless of the noise he made, and ran into the library.

Just as he expected, the oil painting was standing on the floor, and Ruth Gordon was gone. He dived through the open window, conscious only of the terrific necessity of overtaking the girl and silencing her.

His fingers twitched and contracted. There could be no holding back now.

He must get to Ruth before Guy Fillmore did—must make sure of her escape, must make sure of her silence. McLain was in this moment lost to every feeling except the ferocious and maddening desire for his lost security.

The world would forever and relentlessly pursue him unless he could lay hands on the fleeing girl.

And then he saw something that almost took away his breath. Ruth Gordon was running over the lawn with someone in hot pursuit. That someone was Guy Fillmore.

McLain was not a swift runner, but the very intensity of his present purpose lent him speed at this

moment.

He lost the two for a few seconds in the shrubbery. Presently he saw them again in a small clearing. The young press agent had overtaken the girl and they were locked in something like a struggle.

McLain, by a circuitous route, managed to approach them without being seen himself.

He now discovered Fillmore and Ruth standing together. He was staring at her with lowered head and steady eyes. The automatic gun taken from Vera Browning's bed was in his hand now.

He might have whipped himself into a murderous attack upon them both but for the fact that, as he paused for a moment in hiding, he heard the girl answer some questions Fillmore had asked.

"No, alone," she said.

McLain's attention became abnormally fixed and acute. He scarcely breathed, focusing all his senses in his ears, crouched there close to where they stood all unconscious of his presence.

Young Fillmore had not yet recognized Ruth. But he did so as he stepped closer and had a good look at her pale face.

"Yes, it's me," she confessed.

The press agent had a sense of humor, and her sudden composure so close upon the heels of her desperate efforts to escape amused him. He laughed while he asked:

"Good lord, Ruth, what is it all about?"

The girl slapped her chest boastfully.

"I am a bold,bad burglar," she told him.

He grinned amiably down at her.

"It sounds like a joke," he commented. "Do you mean to say that you have been burglarizing Miss Browning's home?"

"I have, Guy."

"And alone?"

"Yes."

Guy Fillmore laughed softly as he studied the young girl attired in a bathing suit.

"I should think you would need pockets to carry your loot," he remarked with mild amusement. "What did you expect to carry away in that outfit of yours, my girl?"

"What I came to steal was too big to go into my pocket or any pocket," she told him. "And besides, you frightened me away."

Again Fillmore regarded the girl with curiosity. No doubt this was some kind of a lark. But what in the world possessed her to attempt a thing so daring utterly alone?

"Let me in on the joke," he suggested, smiling.

She hesitated a moment, then answered:

"Well, you see, while we were all talking at dinner about the recent burglaries committed by some unknown man, I listened to Vera Browning's boasting about all she would do if she caught an intruder in her house. And I thought what a joke it would be to sneak in and steal something just for fun."

"Honestly, Ruth?" he cried.

"Yes, Guy. Did you think I had no nerve?"

"I thought you had too much sense," he replied frankly.

"But I did it really to help you out," she pouted. "I wanted to give you a chance to do some press agent work for Miss Browning."

Fillmore grinned.

"Don't try to make a monkey out of me, young lady," he said sternly. "You're pretty as the devil and the moon is bright and all that; but, after all, you are a

prisoner at the bar. Don't you know that entering a dwelling for the purpose of stealing is a penitentiary offense?"

Ruth Gordon tossed her bobbed head.

"How ungrateful you are, Guy. I merely wanted you to have the chance of writing a story about it. 'Leading Actress Burglarized,' or something like that."

The young man shook a finger at her.

"We can find stories to print more easily and more conveniently," he told her. "But what did you come to steal?"

"That famous oil painting—that is, I intended to take it when you frightened me away. I left it standing on the floor when I had to make a run for my life. But, oh, the fright you gave me. When I heard your voice on the stairs I was afraid you would shoot."

Fillmore laughed softly to himself.

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded hotly.

"Your foolhardiness, Ruth. I never heard of anything to equal this. And what a desperate chance you took. For the sake of a little fun at Vera Browning's expense you risked your very life. No doubt I would have taken a shot at you, but fortunately I forgot to take my gun as I ran from my room."

"Yes, fortunate for me," the girl sighed.

"How did you manage to get into the house?" he inquired after a pause.

"Oh, that was easy enough," replied Ruth Gordon. "I had it all planned out during the dinner. Before Olive Bentley and I left I slipped into the library and unlatched a window. I got in through that."

"You are a shrewd little burglaress," he taunted. "And I have a mind to punish you right now."

"How would you punish me?" she demanded saucily.

"By kissing you three times, Ruth."

"Why only three times?" Her laugh held daring.

"Well, I might make it five." Fillmore made a dash for her, but she eluded him swiftly.

They were headed back toward the house, when both stopped as if by mutual consent. McLain, from his hiding place, stared in the same direction. The entire house was lit up.

"Hello, I wonder what is up?" he heard Guy Fillmore exclaim.

"I guess your absence has been discovered, and they are beginning to search for you," Ruth suggested.

"Don't think so," Guy replied, shaking his head doubtfully. "It must be something far more serious than that. Vera Browning knows that I am a very light sleeper and that I often roam about the grounds in the quiet hours of night. Well, I better run back and find out what's happened to arouse everyone in the house."

Ruth Gordon held him back.

"Shall I go with you and confess?" she grinned.

"No," he cried emphatically. "You skip home as fast as you can and lie low. There is no telling what sort of an aftermath there may be to this mad escapade of yours. I think it is best to keep it secret for the present."

"Perhaps you are right," the girl agreed.

Fillmore did not leave her at once. For a while he stared at her trim figure revealed in the moonlight.

She stood there unabashed as if expecting him to make the first move. A sudden fire kindled in his eyes and he stepped boldly forward.

"Ruth," he said, his voice low and tense. "I don't want to punish you now as you deserve to be punished. I am afraid if I kissed you now, you would never feel the same toward me."

She dropped her gaze demurely and retreated a

step. She did not dare to speak just now for fear she might betray her love for Guy Fillmore.

"Yes, you are right," she whispered, then turned abruptly and ran.

Once she stopped for a moment and looked over her shoulder. Guy Fillmore was walking steadily and slowly toward the brightly illuminated Browning cottage.

She breathed a deep sigh, then resumed her flight homeward.

Chapter 67

THE FINGER OF GUILT.

CARLTON McLAIN'S one thought was that of making his escape before it was too late. But he could not go as he was—dressed in bathing trunks and a jersey coat. His cottage as well as the one occupied by Olive Bentley stood on one of the islands across the bay. He was half afraid to return by the boat left at the landing.

But he must. The boat itself held some of his wearing apparel as well as Ruth Gordon's cape. The boat itself might be used as evidence against him.

He tried to think what must be done between now and morning and what he should do to-morrow. Ruth Gordon returned to his mind.

It was absolutely essential that he make sure of her silence. Yet, she had already committed herself, had said that she entered the Browning home alone.

So far so good. No one could involve him unless the girl was made to reveal more than she had told. He counted on her loyalty to him to keep her tongue silent.

Then abruptly in his thoughts, he found himself face to face with the horrible facts. He had murdered Vera Browning, and in the morning Ruth Gordon would know that he had done the deed. And now his peril became plain, for the young girl, under those circumstances, would not remain silent unless it was forced upon her.

He tried to think of means to compel her. His racing thoughts tested a dozen possibilities inherent in the situation as it stood; but none of them seemed to

offer him a chance.

McLain realized that he could not, to any purpose, threaten to implicate her. Guy Fillmore already knew what her part in the affair had been.

"Oh, damn it all!" he groaned as he made his way slowly toward the landing. "What a fool I was to take such a chance. I'll have to face it alone, unless — unless——"

His hands clenched and a fierce look came into his eyes.

He crept into the boat and reached for the oars. He was a man whose worst impulses had been loosed. His thoughts dodged to and fro, seeking a way out of the trap into which he had fallen.

But he found escape barred by the plain fact that in the morning Ruth Gordon would know that he had killed the actress.

As he sat there with his head bowed and staring at the water, his ears were on the alert. What he expected took place within the next minute.

The young girl had to come back to the boat in order to be rowed over to the island on which she lived with Miss Bentley.

She came trudging wearily. McLain wondered if this might not be his opportunity to rid himself of her forever. A blow on the head with one of the oars and all would be over. A rock tied to her body would cause her body to sink so that no one could find it.

McLain lifted an oar and held it poised. The girl, unsuspecting, came closer. Suddenly, within reach of sudden death, she stopped.

"Oh, is that you, Carlton?" she asked in a breath.

It was too late. He dared not strike. She had seen the lifted oar and she would scream or dodge. She was already crawling into the boat.

Her slim body was so graceful and fine, so soft and fragile. His eyes fastened on her and he licked his dry lips.

His continued stare made her uncomfortable and she held out her hand.

"Give me my cape, please," she said. "I am chilled to the bone."

McLain gave it to her; thought of throwing it over her head and smothering her outeries while his eager fingers cut into her soft throat.

But the thought did not take shape in time to harden into resolution before she took the cape and drew it about her shoulders.

He nodded grimly. There was time enough for that after they reached the island and were ashore.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "Guy Fillmore heard me and caught me, but I told him I was alone."

"You ought to have waited," he replied hoarsely.

"I did not tell him you were along," she reminded him.

He mumbled his thanks. There was no longer any gayety in the girl. She was obviously tired and weary as she sat, her young shoulders hunched and her hands lying listlessly in her lap.

"Well," he drawled, "our expedition did not work out the way we expected, did it?"

"No, Carlton."

McLain felt the insane desire to scream at her because she showed so little concern when he had killed a woman. He was rowing swiftly now and presently the boat touched bottom. Ruth Gordon jumped ashore.

"I guess we better beat it," she suggested with a faint laugh.

"What's your hurry?" he demanded gruffly.

"No particular hurry, old thing," the girl answered. "But I am rather tired and also disgusted with our failure. As burglars we are both good butchers. Instead of us laughing in the morning we'll be listening to someone else doing it. Well, good night."

She turned.

The man tried to leap after her with murder in his eyes, but he became suddenly conscious of the fact that the moon was very bright—that from the window of the Bentley cottage he might be seen.

But this would not have deterred him, for the thing was an absolute necessity.

What saved the young girl's life was her agility and failing to heed his cry to stop. She ran out of harm's way not a moment too soon, however.

With a low muttered curse, McLain darted after her, then halted in his tracks.

A noise as if someone had opened a window frightened him into sudden inaction. He watched Ruth Gordon disappear with a cry of baffled rage.

Making his way slowly to his cottage, he allowed his thoughts to run where they willed. His fear was becoming dulled, and several drinks of whiskey served to arouse his courage.

He began to feel vaguely that he could meet the situation. Finally, in a drunken stupor, he lay down on the bed.

In a little while, however, the stupor wore off, and his mind began racing again. McLain had a creative imagination. He found himself reflecting with increasing bitterness upon the overturn in his affairs within the last twelve hours gone.

It was just twelve hours ago that he had begun reading his play to Vera Browning. He had been as full of triumph as if the play was already on the boards.

Now the play was ashes, the actress was dead, and he himself had killed her.

In the morning Ruth Gordon would know. The murderer twisted and turned, writhing in the torment of his own thoughts, weak with self pity, crying out against the luck that had failed him and brought down all the structure of his hopes in ruin and despair.

Again and again the thought assaulted him that Ruth would know he had killed Vera Browning. He tried to argue it away. She could not be sure. She only knew that he had left her to go upstairs. How could they prove he had done it?

Then he remembered the bottle which contained the deadly drug. He remembered too, that it had dropped from his hand and broken while near the bed.

The drug was Dr. Pogue's property. They might as readily suspect him, for it was a well-known fact that he and his actress wife lived under strained conditions.

It was also generally known that the physician was in love with Olive Bentley, and that he would have married her had Vera consented to a divorce. Yes, that provided a very good motive for the murder.

Suppose he went to Ruth Gordon in the morning and told her that Dr. Pogue had murdered his wife?

He might even tell her that he had seen the physician in Vera's room. The more McLain pondered over this, the more he became convinced that this was the avenue of escape.

Sleep was utterly out of the question. He rose and dressed hurriedly. When he stepped from his cottage he could see the Browning home still brilliantly illuminated.

With a sure step he walked down toward the landing and climbed into the boat.

McLain felt sure now that he could fasten the

crime upon Dr. Pogue. Yes, there could be no hitch if he kept his wits about him. And so, confident of success, he approached the scene of the murder.

At the door of the Browning home he met Guy Fillmore.

"Something wrong over here?" he inquired casually. "I saw the house all lit up."

No immediate answer was forthcoming. McLain stepped past Fillmore into the hall and repeated the question.

"Yes, something is dreadfully wrong," Fillmore replied at last.

Then old Mr. Galvin, Vera's father hove into sight. He was crying.

"Think of it, Mr. McLain," he wept. "Vera has been murdered. She is dead."

"Dead?" the playwright ejaculated, feigning intense surprise. "Why, how can that be possible? She wasn't even sick."

"She was murdered in cold blood," the old man explained. "Someone broke into the house. Whoever it was went to her room and killed her with chloroform. Oh, isn't it awful!" And again he fell to weeping.

"Did you—did you send for the police?" he addressed Guy Fillmore.

"Yes, I did," the latter answered.

Carlton McLain felt a cold grip at his heart.

"Where—where is Vera?" he asked in a whisper.

"In her room," came back. "Her mother and Dr. Pogue are with her."

"I'll go up," the playwright said, and began to ascend the stairs.

He was followed by Guy Fillmore and the murdered woman's father. Several of the servants stood whispering in the hall. The door to Vera's room was

open.

Tessie, an elderly girl, who had been in Miss Browning's employ as a confidential companion and maid, was in tears. Between sobs she endeavored to put things in order.

Every time she passed Dr. Pogue she gave him a hostile glance. It was easy to see that these two were not on friendly terms.

When Tessie attempted to smooth the pillow on which the dead woman's head lay, the physician shook his head impatiently.

"Can't you let that alone now?" he protested. "It is best not to disturb anything until the police have been here."

The woman's features hardened as she looked at him.

"If you had been any kind of a husband this thing would never have happened," she reproached. "You never treated her right. Even last night you had to quarrel with her."

At this accusation which came so unexpected, Dr. Pogue felt himself constrained to offer an explanation. While everyone present in the room knew that he and Vera did not agree very well as husband and wife, he considered it a duty to say something in self-justification.

"Yes, it is true—and I regret it more than I can express in mere words, that Vera and I quarreled last night," he said, his voice quivering with suppressed emotion. "But it was not entirely my fault. She demanded some things I could not grant. This—this marriage of ours was a failure from the very beginning."

McLain experienced a sense of secret triumph as he glanced at those standing about. Mr. and Mrs. Galvin, the dead woman's parents, showed their displeasure very

plainly.

This was the time to throw himself into the breach. Very slowly and very deliberately he said:

"Yesterday afternoon I noticed a bottle of chloroform in your bag as it lay on the table downstairs."

The silence at once became tense. All eyes were turned to Dr. Pogue.

"Yes," he admitted, his lips curling into a sneering smile. "I have a bottle of chloroform in my bag."

"You had," McLain corrected quickly. "Are you sure you still have?"

The physician hesitated, his eyes mildly amused, his mouth firm.

"Are you suggesting that I killed my wife?" he inquired without anger.

At this the murdered woman's maid pushed herself forward, raising a finger accusingly at Dr. Pogue.

"I believe you'd do it!" she exclaimed. "I really believe you'd do it. Yes, you can look at me!" Her voice rose shrilly. "I know you. I lived with poor Vera for twelve years and I have seen you with her. You never cared for her after she became your wife.

"What if she was a little wild? She was an actress and had the temperament of one. You never loved her, and I believe you——"

"That will do, Tessie," Guy Fillmore broke in. "Be careful what you say."

Tessie submitted grumblingly as she was being pushed out of the room.

Dr. Pogue wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He stood unflinchingly facing the others.

McLain's soft laugh seemed strangely out of place in the presence of the dead. He whispered a few words to old Mr. Galvin, then turned to the physician.

"Dr. Pogue," he drawled, "you see, we are not

likely to suppose that you would kill your wife. There is no reason why you should want her out of the way, is there? There—there was no one else who might have—have——"

The physican raised his hand and silenced the speaker.

"I konw what you are driving at, sir," he said coldly. "You spoke about a bottle of chloroform being in my bag downstairs. I insist that it is still there. Suppose we have a look."

"Yes, let's have a look," McLain shot back quickly. "Come downstairs, all of you."

Everyone except Mrs. Galvin, the dead woman's mother, left the boudoir and followed the playwright who had taken the lead.

The footsteps of the men echoed along the hall, became muffled and ceased. Within a few moments the first evidence would be brought to light—evidence, that pointed the finger of guilt at Dr. Pogue.

Chapter 68

"LOVE ME NOW!"

MRS. GORDON and Willard Parker sprang apart as the door was pushed open. The man who entered, however, was none other than the waiter. At least he wore the garb of a professional waiter and he had the same stealthy tread. But a close observer would have noticed that his sharp features and shrewd eyes were those of a man belonging to another profession.

His was the cool self-assurance of a detective.

The smile on his face was half amused, half impudent. He did not withdraw hastily with a few stammered words of apology. Instead he remained standing at the door, waiting for the rebuke that was sure to come.

"Well?" demanded Parker angrily. "Who called you?"

"I thought someone in this room rang the bell," the man replied.

"We didn't," Alice broke in, her cheeks still flushed.

"You bet we didn't," her companion added emphatically.

The waiter bowed politely.

"Then I beg your pardon," he drawled and made his exit.

"What do you think of that fellow?" Willard Parker demanded of Alice as they were once more alone.

"I don't like his looks," she answered a little nervously. "He reminds me of someone I have seen before. I wish I could remember when and where. "With a deep

sigh she began to rake the chambers of her memory. But it was in vain. "I guess I'll have to give it up, Willard. But just the same this place gives me the creeps.

"Take me somewhere else where we can continue our conversation with more security. You know," she added in a more guarded tone, "I can't afford to take a chance of being caught alone with you."

Philip Gordon offered no objections when his wife told him the following morning that she had invited a number of friends to spend the week-end at Oak Manor. He rather welcomed a little diversion.

As she named the prospective guests he listened in silence. Most of them were people he knew quite well. Others were vouched for enthusiastically by Alice.

When she mentioned Willard Parker, he raised his eyebrows questioningly. But she spoke before he framed the words he wanted to say.

"Please don't fuss, dear," she coaxed. "I know Willard has hit the rocks lately. But he is so handsome and so popular that I included him. Of course," she added with mock earnestness, "he may not even accept my invitation. You see, I added a personal note, warning him to behave."

"What little I know about the fellow is not to his credit," Phil responded. "But no doubt the women of your set will enjoy his company. I am told he is a capital entertainer."

Alice beamed upon her husband.

"Then—then you approve, Phil?" she cried.

"I suppose I'll have to, Alice," came back some-

what frigidly. "I don't want to place you in an embarrassing position by asking him to stay away."

"Thanks, dear." Alice made a sudden move toward her husband, but he escaped her embracing arms by drawing aside.

She watched him leave the room with narrowing eyes and a sneer upon her lips.

"Alright, if my touch is distasteful to you, I know at least one man who welcomes it," she muttered to herself. "And unless I am much mistaken, you'll be whistling a different tune before long."

During the three days which intervened until the arrival of the invited guests, Oak Manor underwent a complete change. Spare bedrooms were cleaned and put in order. The drawing room and the ballroom were made ready.

Under Alice's supervision electric lights were strung through the part of the grounds where an open-air fete was to be held.

A jazz orchestra was engaged for the occasion and numerous other preparations were made without sparing expense. For the first time since their marriage the hospitality of Oak Manor was to be flung to the world.

Old John Procter shook his gray head and remained in the back-ground. He had warned Phil repeatedly without receiving the least encouragement. What was the use?

If Alice's husband stood for all this "damned foolishness" as he termed it, why should he interfere?

So far as Phil was concerned, he had no serious ojections to entertaining some old friends at his magnificent summer home. Quite a few of who were coming had been angling for an invitation for a long while.

It was quite natural for him to have a sense of pride. It would give him a degree of pleasure to play

the host.

The only fly in the ointment was the disagreeable nature of his domestic life. While a number of old friends called him "a lucky dog" for having a beautiful woman like Alice as a wife, he found little reason to enthuse.

But he determined to make the best of the situation so long as the invited guests remained under his roof. He derived some consolation from the fact that Alice had changed toward him.

Her attitude was now that of a loving, if not decidedly a dutiful, wife.

She no longer interfered with the raising and educating of the children by his first wife. She seemed quite content to allow Miss Desmond to have full sway. At least, it looked that way to Phil.

The arrival of the expected guests wrought a complete change in the established routine at Oak Manor. Dinners, card parties, dances and other forms of entertainment relieved each other in bewildering succession.

From early morning until late at night the house resounded with gayety and noisy mirth. Willard Parker's conduct was above reproach.

But it became more and more evident that he devoted most of his time to Alice Gordon. He never missed an opportunity to be alone with her, and before long this fact was commented upon by several of the other guests.

Phil looked on with an ironical smile. If his wife hoped to excite his jealousy by deliberately encouraging Willard Parker, he meant to show her how little he cared.

And then came the night of the ball. It promised to be a brilliant affair to which a great number of additional guests had been invited.

Alice was in her boudoir, trying on several costly gowns. She was disturbed by the sudden entrance of Nora Evans.

"What do you want?" she asked impatiently.

Nora did not speak at once. She made a sign to her mistress that she wished to be alone with her for a moment. Alice at once dismissed the two maids and closed the door behind them.

"Well, what is it, Nora?" She turned to the latter.

"I am worried about your baby," the girl said in a guarded tone. "You better come over and look at it."

"What is the matter with her?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Nora. "But she is rolling her eyes in such a queer way and squirms as if she had convulsions."

Alice gave a start which was not prompted by any maternal solicitude.

Her first thought was that Phil would call off the ball if he heard of the baby being seriously ill. That must be avoided by all means.

"Why do you come to me with that just now, Nora?" she exclaimed with an angry stamp of her foot. "I am sure it can't be as bad as all that. All babies have convulsions now and then. I believe you are making it worse than it really is. You like to exaggerate at times."

Nora made no reply, but merely shrugged her angular shoulders. Her face betrayed something like secret dread.

Alice finally consented to have a look at her baby.

She followed the maid from the room with evident reluctance. The expression on her face was not that of a mother fearing for her child. It was cold and hard and wrathful.

She displayed no emotion other than revulsion as she stood at the little crib and watched her baby—her own flesh and blood writhing in mute agony.

There was no pity in her eyes, no sympathy, no grief. And yet she found the horrible spectacle fascina-

ting.

Even Nora Evans, callous as she was, seemed astounded at the utter heartlessness and icy indifference of this mother.

"You better give the baby something to quiet her," Alice said as she turned away. "I am sure you have something that will do the trick, Nora. But whatever you do, don't let anyone come into this room and don't spread the news that the baby has convulsions."

Nora promised and her mistress swept from the room without another glance at the little sufferer.

Back in her boudoir, Alice finished her toilet with the help of two maids. And when the task was done, she was indeed a picture to behold. She wore a white gown of flimsy silk and lace, which left her finely molded arms and shoulders bare.

The skirt, extremely short, afforded a generous display of her shapely ankles and limbs.

Alice had not yet fallen for the popular bob, and her luxurious hair had been arranged in a most becoming fashion.

Her cheeks, soft and pink, required no rouge. Nor did her full red lips. And there was a smoldering fire in her eyes.

Yes, this was the night of all nights for Alice Gordon. She felt confident of being the loveliest woman at the ball.

"You may go now," she told the maids. "I want to be alone for a while."

But she had hardly taken a seat when her husband came in without having been announced and without knocking. He was in evening suit and looked unusually handsome.

Alice's momentary frown of displeasure quickly changed to a smile of welcome.

"Ah, Phil," she murmured, "how nice of you to come."

"How is the baby this evening?" he inquired gravely. "I understand she was not so well to-day."

"Oh, she is improving, dear," Alice lied. "There is no cause for worry."

As she spoke she stepped before him, turning her lithe body from side to side. Phil gazed at her in moody silence. Ah, what a magnificent woman she was after all. What a tempting creature.

With a sinuous movement she glided another step forward and suddenly threw her arms about her neck.

"I—I wish you wouldn't do that," he protested and stepped back.

Alice let her arms drop and viewed him with something like mute supplication in her eyes.

"Why not, Phil?" she said slowly. "Can it be possible that you ceased to love me forever? I have tried, oh so hard, to make you forget my mistakes of the past. Won't you be just a little kinder to me?"

The next instant her arms were about his neck and her velvet cheeks lay against his caressingly.

Like a torrent of fire the blood rushed through Gordon's veins. The delicate, subtle perfume, overpowering like that of a tropical flower, fairly intoxicated him. And then he kissed her.

"Phil—Phil!" she gasped. "Love me — love me now!"

With an abandon of which he thought her incapable, the woman, her passion running loose, clung to him, kissed him and almost suffocated him with her caresses.

And then Phil suddenly awakened as from a trance.

He disengaged himself from her embrace. Like a shadow the image of his first wife had risen before him.

No—no, it must not be. He dare not make love to this woman, though the law made her his wife. His heart, his very soul—every fibre of his being still belonged to the one whom he had wronged so deeply and lost—Marie.

Alice stared at him in cold dismay. She bit her lip and an angry light came into her eyes. She seemed to feel what was going through his mind.

"You—you are still thinking of your first wife," she accused him.

"Yes," he nodded. "I was thinking of her."

"Is that fair to me?" Alice exclaimed shrilly, her dark orbs ablaze.

Gordon was about to make a reply to this, when the door opened and Nora Evans entered hurriedly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she muttered as she saw the master of the house. "I did not know you had a visitor, Mrs. Gordon."

Phil walked deliberately over the window which gave Alice a chance to make a warning sign to Nora Evans.

The latter, however, had something of grave importance on her mind, for she did not leave as she was all too evidently expected to do by her mistress.

"What is it, Nora?" the latter in quired with a show of impatience.

"You are wanted at the telephone, Mrs. Gordon," the girl answered, but that was not at all what she wanted to say. In a whisper she added: "The baby is much worse. You better come at once."

Alice stole a glance at her husband who stood at the window with his back still turned.

"You'll excuse me for a moment won't you, Phil, while I answer the phone?" she said. "I wish you'd remain in this room, for I want to see you about something,

when I come back."

He gave his assent with a curt nod of his head.

But he did not wait. As soon as his wife and Nora were gone, he went downstairs. What prompted him to do that is hard to explain. Perhaps he wanted to satisfy himself that Alice was really wanted at the telephone.

Chapter 69

"IT WAS YOU!"

ALMOST dramatic scene seemed imminent as Dr. Pogue, accompanied by McLain, Guy Fillmore and old Mr. Galvin entered the room which contained the physician's professional bag. It was a move freighted with tremendous importance. Of the four men, Carlton McLain appeared to be the most anxious.

Everything, yes, his very life, perhaps, depended upon the developments of the next few minutes.

A feeling of secret elation swept over him, for he knew that the bottle of chloroform was no longer in the doctor's bag.

With an air of confidence Dr. Pogue reached for the bag, placed it on the table, and began to search for the drug. His hands fumbled among the contents, then suddenly ceased to move.

What did it mean? McLain had insinuated that he was the murderer of his own wife. Vera had been killed with chloroform.

If the drug could still be found in his bag he could clear himself of all suspicion easy enough. But it wasn't. Very slowly he turned to face the men watching him.

"You—you were right, Mr. McLain," he admitted, his voice shaking a little. "I had a bottle of chloroform in my bag, but it's gone now."

"It is gone?" Guy Fillmore asked, amazed.

"Yes."

"What became of it?" McLain demanded.

Continued in next number

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